

About Polesia

A unique wilderness of global importance



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Where is Polesia?

Polesia is a vast wilderness area that straddles the borders of Belarus, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine. It spans more than 900 km from west to east and measures 300 km from north to south. This transboundary landscape is not only wild, but vast. It covers more than 186,000 km², as large as half the total landmass of Germany (Ukraine 94,000 km², Belarus 62,000 km², Russia 23,000 km², Poland 7,000 km²). The main artery of Polesia is the Pripyat river, which extends more than 750 km.

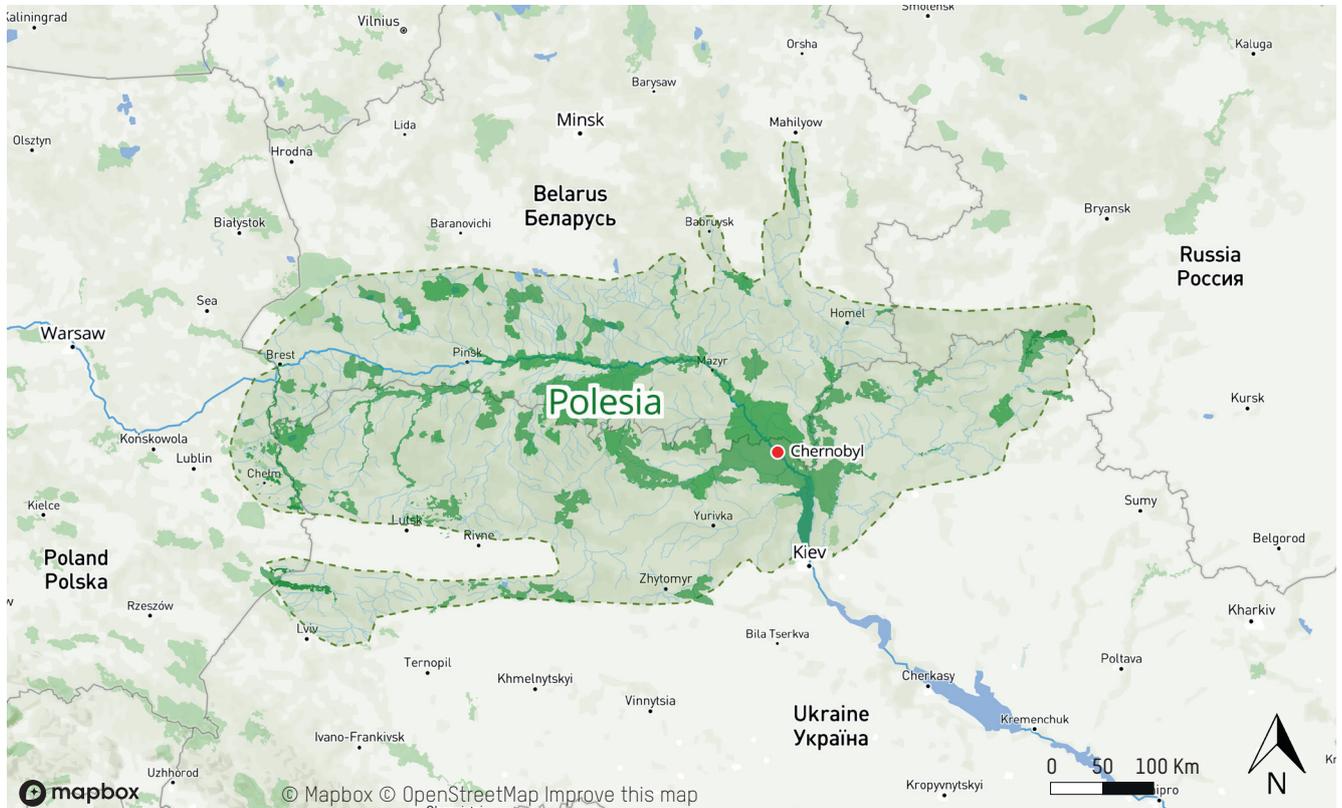


Figure 1: Location of the wilderness area Polesia and its internationally protected areas (dark green)

Why is Polesia so special?

Polesia is Europe's Amazon. It is the continent's greatest intact floodplain region, with pristine forests and immense wetlands. Natural and wild rivers lie at the heart of Polesia – the Bug in Poland, Dnieper in Ukraine, and most prominently the Pripyat. The Pripyat is one of the last major undamaged rivers in Europe and shapes the region with its countless meanders, tributaries, and oxbows. Polesia's pristine areas are home to some of the most biodiverse and culturally rich parts of Europe. The survival of many endangered mammals and millions of birds depends on this untouched landscape. The area not only has tremendous natural intrinsic importance, but also provides immeasurable benefits to people through ecosystem services such as water retention, flood mitigation, clean air, and carbon storage. Polesia also has a strong cultural heritage. Due to their relative isolation the indigenous population of Polesia, Poleshuks, have historically had little contact with people from other regions. Deep in the heart of Polesia, the traditional way of life like the use of local herbal medicine and traditional singing has been very well preserved.



Figure 2: River Pripyat in the Belarusian part of Polesia

Diverse range of habitats

While Polesia suffered major environmental impacts during the Soviet period, large parts remain pristine. Protecting Polesia is of tremendous importance for nature conservation in Europe. Its landscape is a huge labyrinth of diverse habitats – waters, islands, swamps, wetlands, and floodplain forests. In spring, as snow melts, vast wetlands form along the river. During this time the Pripyat better resembles a large lake than a river. Pripyatsky National Park protects the middle of this stretch of the river. It is one of the most pristine areas of Belarus and a key site for migratory birds. Another area of immense ecological importance in Polesia is the Almany mire in Belarus. Covering 100,000 hectares, it is the largest transition mire in Europe. It stores a huge amount of carbon and provides a home to Belarus' largest population of the globally endangered greater spotted eagle.



Figure 3: Diverse range of habitats along the river Pripyat in the Ukrainian Pripyat-Stokhid National Park in Polesia

Endangered species

Polesia is an area of stunning biodiversity. The diverse range of habitats found in the region provide homes for endangered mammals such as brown bears, wolves, lynxes, European bison, as well as for millions of waders and water birds on their seasonal migrations. Polesia is particularly important for the globally threatened aquatic warbler. Once common in fen mires and wet meadows throughout Europe, the aquatic warbler has disappeared from most of its former range. Today, its global population is confined to breeding sites in only five countries. Polesia is one of the key areas crucial for its survival. It hosts around 60-80% of the global population of aquatic warbler.



Figure 4: Aquatic warbler (*Acrocephalus paludicola*) singing in the Ukrainian Pripjat-Stokhid National Park in Polesia

Bird migrations

Polesia's flood meadows are of global significance for bird species. The Pripjat floodplain alone is a key destination for more than 1.5 million migratory birds annually. Here, the birds nest, rest, and gather strength on their long journeys. Spring numbers of at least 150,000-200,000 Eurasian wigeons, 200,000-400,000 ruffs and 20,000-25,000 black-tailed godwits have been recorded in the Pripjat floodplains. Collectively, they form the largest gathering in Central and Eastern Europe.



Figure 5: Ruffs (*Philomachus pugnax*) breed in the Pripjat floodplains

Internationally important protected areas

Many sites in Polesia have been designated as areas of international importance for nature conservation: 125 have been recognised as Emerald Network or Natura 2000 sites, but there are also UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, Ramsar sites and Important Bird Areas. These sites include the transboundary Biosphere Reserve West Polesie, made up of three national parks – Pribuzhskoe Polesie (Belarus), Shatsky (Ukraine) and Polesie (Poland) as well as the Almany – Perebrody Mires Transboundary Ramsar Site, made up of the Almany Mires (Belarus) and the Perebrody Peatlands (Ukraine).

Moreover, Polesia has significant potential for gaining UNESCO World Heritage Status. It has recently been awarded a prestigious Endangered Landscapes Programme grant to restore wetlands, improve connectivity of the habitats of large mammals, and secure further protection. This will also involve the application for Polesia to be designated a World Heritage Site with the aim of creating one of Europe's largest protected natural wilderness areas¹.

Ecosystem services

The habitats of Polesia also provide essential natural services to people by decreasing the impact of floods, purifying water, and mitigating climate change. Riparian forests in Polesia provide an important flood control function by reducing the force, height, and volume of floodwaters and allowing them to spread out horizontally, causing relatively minor damage across the floodplain.

Polesia's mires, bogs, and peatlands play a major role in the global carbon balance, because of their extent and the large volumes of carbon stored. Protecting them is crucial in the fight against climate change. Mires act as sinks of atmospheric carbon dioxide, while peatlands constitute large reservoirs of carbon and nitrogen. On the other hand, drained peatlands emit carbon dioxide. It is estimated that up to a million tons of carbon are stored annually in the Almany mire alone.

Cultural heritage and tourism

Many traditions of Polesia, such as language, fashion, festive rites, food, medicine, singing, folklore, and wild honey farming, have been carefully passed down by Poleshuks for generations. There are around 100 architectural, historical, artistic, and archaeological heritage sites of state importance in Polesia. Every town and village has unique charm and character, and the landscape is dotted with distinctive wooden churches. Local museums and cultural centres provide visitors with a first-hand experience of traditional life. Several national and international events take place in the region each year, covering themes as diverse as ethno-cultural traditions, food, and haymaking. Polesia's cultural and natural heritage is attracting increasing amounts of tourists to the region.



Figure 6: Typical house in the countryside in the Ukrainian part of Polesia

¹ More information here: <https://www.endangeredlandscapes.org/projects/polesia-belarus-ukraine/>

International wilderness

Poland's part of Polesia, also known as Western Polesie, is located in the Lubelskie region along the eastern borderlands of the country. Lublin, the historical centre of Eastern Poland and the region's largest town, is the main gateway to Polesia. The main settlement of Western Polesie is Włodawa and the most important natural area is Polesie National Park.

The Ukrainian part of Polesia, also known as Polissia or Polisia, consists of six districts. The main tourism centres are Lutsk, Ostroh, Rivne, and Shatsk. There are many important and sometimes inaccessible wetlands, which is why the area is often referred to as the Polissia Amazon. There are many nature parks, the best known are Shatsky, Pripyat-Stokhid and Mezynsky. With an area of more than 225,000 hectares, the "Chernobyl Radiation and Ecological Biosphere Reserve" is Ukraine's largest nature reserve and a popular tourist destination.

Belarusian Polesia is located in the Brest and Gomel districts. A key characteristic is the presence of unique mires. The Pinsk mires are one of the largest wetlands in the world. They cover an area of almost 4.7 million hectares and are about 11,000 years old. 2,000 years ago, Polesia was already described by the Greek historian Herodotus.

Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant

Chernobyl is located on the Pripjat river in Ukraine, close to its border with Belarus. It is the most notorious city in Polesia as a result of the 1986 nuclear disaster. The accident released large amounts of radioactive material into the air and into the power plant's cooling pond. More than 300,000 people were evacuated from more than 500 km² around the plant – an area now known as the Chernobyl exclusion zone. Authorities encased the old power plant in a concrete sarcophagus. The cooling pond, which was heavily contaminated during the accident, was separated from the Pripjat river by a dam. Today, large parts of the area are still contaminated. Radiation hotspots are the cooling pond and the Pripjat river floodplain within the Chernobyl exclusion zone. The whole watershed of the river Dnieper was affected and sediments in various reservoirs, e.g. in Kiev, are heavily contaminated with radioactivity as well.

The accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant resulted in the complete abandonment of a huge area of Polesia, paradoxically setting up the largest ever study into how nature recovers when people leave an area en masse. Three decades later, Chernobyl is a place where nature can be nature and it's now one of the wildest areas in Europe.

Why it matters

Polesia is in danger. Pressures from current land use – logging, fires, drainage, roads, pipelines, hunting, mining, radioactive contamination – are damaging the ecological integrity of Polesia. But there is now an even greater threat to the region from the planned construction of a 2,000 km-long inland navigation waterway – the so-called 'E40 waterway' – connecting the Black Sea with the Baltic Sea. Construction of the E40 waterway would have disastrous consequences for Polesia, including its environment, nature, hydrology, and people.

Find out more about the planned E40 waterway and why our strong partnership aims to save the Polesia.

Read our factsheets:

- "Polesia under threat – How a new waterway could destroy Polesia's natural environment"
- "E40 waterway would lead to droughts, and destroy rivers and wildlife in Poland"
- "E40 waterway would damage pristine wilderness areas in Ukraine and Belarus and turn an important carbon sink into a carbon source"
- "No economic case for new waterway through Polesia"
- "Polesia's enormous potential for nature-based tourism"
- "E40 waterway could expose millions of people to dangerous levels of radiation"

Who is Save Polesia?

Our coalition includes six organisations from four countries.



APB – Birdlife Belarus

APB's mission is the conservation of biological diversity for the benefit of the present and future generations and involvement of people in active nature protection activities.



Bahna, Belarus

The aim of Bahna is to prevent further degradation of the environment and to preserve natural habitats and biodiversity of our country.



FZS – Frankfurt Zoological Society, Germany

FZS invests in wilderness areas of global significance – “legacy landscapes” – with aesthetic and natural values, pristine landscapes, important ecosystem processes or values, and endemic and endangered species.



NECU – National Ecological Centre of Ukraine

NECU is an NGO with branches in a dozen of Ukrainian cities. It works to bring environmental consideration into the core of any decision making.



OTOP – Polish Society for the Protection of Birds

OTOP's mission is to protect birds and their habitats and establish and manage new bird reserves. The organisation has strong educational work in order to increase public support for nature conservation.



USPB – Ukrainian Society for the Protection of Birds

USPB's mission is to conserve the biodiversity of Ukraine by saving birds, sites and biotopes.



Contact for more information

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Find out more on www.savepolesia.org